

ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOUSE

There is no doubt in my own mind. Rocky Mountain House leads Alberta in the export of curious news items, friendliness to strangers, and that special atmosphere that breeds adventure. Perhaps David Thompson, the explorer, touched that region with a magic wand when he wintered at the Fort on his way to the Pacific. Possibly the old Indians endowed the place with their magic; or perhaps the spell goes farther back, to the time when the Rocky Mountains were forming. Draw your own conclusions, but take it from me, there's witchery at Rocky Mountain House.

I had heard so much about this fabulous spot, that I almost hesitated about visiting it. Perhaps I had a fear that a mysterious portal would open, and like the fabled traveller of old, would find myself shut within some mystic cavern.

I must confess that this romantic nonsense was mostly shaken out of me by the C. P. R. when I rode their thrice-weekly train from Red Deer to Rocky.

The spell came back, though, when I arrived. I was met at the train by the young school inspector, Finlay Barnes, who carried me off to "a typical Rocky Mountain House

dinner", and delicious fare it was -- baked moose meat with dumplings and mountain blueberry pie. In the evening I made a little talk in the Legion Hall, and was not at all surprised when a large dog, named Skipper, came gravely in and seated himself on the platform. The townsfolk also took Skipper's presence as a matter of course, and I was informed that the dog was especially fond of music -- Bach and Beethoven were his favorites -- but that he attended every meeting of more than two persons, and seemed to know before-hand when meetings and concerts were going to take place.

I was much impressed by Skipper, especially when he arose and offered to shake hands just before I began to speak. I told the audience when the dog walked out, it would be time for me to stop speaking. I had spoken perhaps six words when Skipper gravely stalked off the platform and walked toward the door. I hurriedly said something about the excellence of a dog's standards of judgment, which brought Skipper to a halt half-way down the aisle. He thought the matter over, finally decided to stick it out, and even offered to shake hands again when the talk was over.

Some dog!

But not unusual for Rocky. They accept Skipper just as they accept the Ogopogo. For my less well-informed reader, perhaps I should explain that the Ogopogo is a horrible

monster which lives beneath the waters of the North Saskatchewan River, and has special headquarters at Rocky Mountain House. He, or she, they've never been able to determine which, is much larger than the Okanagan Lake Ogopogo in British Columbia, and much more fierce and terrifying than those rather meek Ogopogos occasionally seen in Ontario.

A hint as to the great serpent's sex I found in one account which tells of the Ogopogo having been seen shortly before freeze-up last fall, swimming toward Edmonton with six little Ogopogos happily swimming along in the wake. This, I would suppose, seems to imply that the Ogopogo is a female. I mentioned this tale to a citizen of Rocky who immediately began to suspect the presence of a second Ogopogo . . . a male.

The Rocky Ogopogo was apparently first viewed by an Indian named Chief Walking Eagle, who staggered into town one day in 1939, gasping that a "fish fifty feet long, and as big around as an Elephant" had persued him across the river!

When asked where he got the "fire-water", Walking Eagle became most indignant and recited numerous of his Christian virtues, which settled the matter as far as Rocky was concerned. Folks knew that Chief Walking Eagle was telling the truth.

Unfortunately, the river was frozen over when I visited Rocky, and I was not able to catch a glimpse of the monster. I have promised, however, to return during the month of May, when the Rocky folk have promised to have a special showing of the Ogopogo for my benefit. I haven't a doubt in the world but that they'll really produce a monster. They do such things at Rocky.

One time, back in 1927 to be exact, the gods of the Plain and Mountain became temporarily angry at Rocky. Why this should be so I have not been able to discover. Possibly it was because the region hadn't furnished its usual tribute of mystic events that year. Whatever it was, it was enough to cause the gods to loose a terrific cyclone on the village. Cyclones were usual in Kansas where I grew up, but at Rocky a cyclone seems to me to be the deliberate act of an outraged diety.

The cyclone struck in July after a long spell of oppressive hot weather. The storm swooped down about three in the afternoon and caught the town entirely unprepared. Folks simply didn't know what was happening. One fellow ran into the open vault of the bank, while another hopped into a big icebox and slammed it shut. Another man grabbed at the nearest object -- the knob of a door. The wind blew the door away and left him holding the knob. A schoolboy was out in the woodshed when the storm hit. The cyclone

blew the building away, leaving him standing there with his arms full of kindling wood. The wooden sidewalks along the main street actually changed sides! Down at Bernie Rosses garage an envelope blew right into a plank -- so far they had to dig it out with a jack-knife. They didn't dig it out right away, of course. As a matter of fact it stayed there quite a while and became one of the local wonders.

One lady who knew about cyclones from living in South Dakota, was out in her yard. She took one look at the approaching storm, knew what to expect, grabbed her baby, and dove for the cellar. She heard the storm hit, knew the house was shaking. Presently, when it was over, she climbed the cellar steps, only to find that the trap-door was no longer there. The house had moved six feet! Her husband had to cut a hole in the floor to get her out.

The children at Rocky were especially delighted to find that the storm had carried away the curfew bell. The bell hasn't been found to this day, but the kids didn't know when they had a good thing, and now a whistle is blown for curfew.

One whole side of Main Street was demolished with a single exception. One store was left almost undamaged. The Indians were so impressed by this obvious sign of the "Great Spirit's" favor, that they took their trade to that store for years!

But the unusual applied to individuals as well as to Ogopogos and cyclones.

At Rocky I encountered what I believe to be the only "tree man" in Canada. His name is John Eagle. He doesn't live in the tree anymore, but he did until it blew down. You see, John Eagle used to be a sailor. He travelled around the world more than a dozen times, saw just about everything there is to see in the world, and came to settle down in a tree at Rocky Mountain House. He was tired of the ocean and the cities. He explained: "You see too many strangers in the cities, and too much of too few strangers on a ship. The noise and crowds are worse than the wolves and bears. Of the two evils, I choose the wolves and the bears!" He wanted solitude, and at first he lived in a tent. But one night a high wind arose and blew the tent down on him. At the same time he fancied he heard the howling of wolves. He climbed a tree and spent the night there. The swaying of the tree reminded him of the swaying of the ocean. He got a wonderful idea! He would build a house in the tree! He began the house the next day. First he built a platform, and on the platform he set a tidy little cabin. He insulated it with shavings from the planing mill, and finally had a warm, comfortable dwelling. Fuel was the biggest problem, but he solved it by leaning poles up against the platform, pulling them up, and sawing them "on his own doorstep"!

Sawing wood makes me remember a tale about a former inhabitant of Rocky who bore the impressive name, Silas K. Vandermark. Silas came from Oklahoma where he was said to have extensive oil holdings. This was borne out by the rolls of money he occasionally had in his possession, but hardly in his appearance, for Silas was a man who had a horror of washing. So great was his affinity for earth, in fact, that he lived in a dug-out some little distance from Rocky. When that dug-out fell in, Silas simply dug another and crawled into it.

It is generally thought that Vandermark's family wanted to get rid of him, and when buying him a railroad ticket, simply touched a spot on the map. To my mind their selection of Rocky is not chance. It is simply magic.

The fuel problem was easily solved by Silas K. Vandermark. He would simply draw a pole up to the entrance of his dug-out, stick it through the door and into the door of his stove. Whenever the log burned off, he would just shove it in a little further. This absolutely eliminated any wood-cutting. His kitchen economy also showed ingenuity. Silas would kill a pig, and just hang it up in a tree. He never bothered to dress the pig at all. He'd merely walk out and cut off his morning bacon, ham, or whatever he was after, and let the rest hang.

Whenever he got a shipment of money from his Oklahoma oil fields, Silas would attend local auction sales. He

bought large quantities of junk, though what he ever did with it, nobody knew.

One time his money was late in arriving, so Silas was forced to look for a job. He went to a lumber boss and applied, but the boss was not impressed with Silas' appearance. He handed Silas a bar of soap and said: "Here, Scrub. Shave. Get a haircut. Come back and I'll give you clean underwear, overalls, and maybe a job."

Of course Silas refused. He stated indignantly that no job was worth that much. He went back to his cave, and shortly afterward more money arrived from Oklahoma. Nevermore was Silas forced to humble himself in that manner.

Silas was most kindhearted, and always insisted on offering a visitor something to eat. Not many cared to partake, but they appreciated the gesture just the same. He would have certain Rocky businessmen write letters for him, but he never let the man who wrote a letter read the answer received. That he took to someone else. He never built any sort of shelter for his pigs and horses. He simply took the pigs into his cave with him, and would have done the same thing for the horses, had there been space.

When he finally died from pneumonia brought on by the general atmosphere and condition of his dug-out, he had no money. What did he do with the sums which he received from Oklahoma?

He certainly didn't spend them. It's a fact that he neither drank nor smoked. His only expense was auction sales, and all he bought was junk. Did he bury his money? . . . Well, a lot of Rocky Mountain House citizens think he did. In fact, looking for Silas' money is a favorite summer sport!

Rocky Mountain House has two railroads . . . the C.P.R. and the C.N.R. When I remarked that this was an interesting if not an astounding fact, I was told about the famous "Battle of Hornburg" which once furnished excitement, not to mention comedy, on a battlefield sixteen miles long -- from Rocky westward to Hornburg.

The C. N. R. was on the job first, and had some twenty miles of grade completed west from Red Deer before the Alberta Central awoke to the fact that a competitor was seriously threatening their territory. The Alberta Central at once began a railway of its own.

The old settlers were amazed! For a long time they had been dreaming of a railroad, but here, in the wink of an eye, were two railroads, working day and night to beat the other out! The old settlers lapsed into happy anticipation of two pay-rolls, two bridges across the Saskatchewan, two gangs of laborers to feed . . . in fact, double of everything! They didn't mind that the two railways would be easily within whistling distance of each other!

In 1911 the C. N. R. was far in the lead. They had, in fact,

laid track to within a mile of Rocky Mountain House. Here, however, they encountered their first serious obstacle in the form of a new piece of grade that cut right across the C. N. R. location.

To the C. N. R. boys the solution was simple and direct. At night they tore the barricade away. By day the Alberta Central boys built it up again.

All this was done with good humor. As T. C. Hargrave, writing in the Calgary Herald, says: "On the one side were Swedes, Norwegians, Austrians, Italians; on the other side were Italians, Austraians, Norwegians and Swedes. The battle went on, according to our old-timers, until the ties had been turned four ways and were plumb wore out!"

The river, of course, had to be crossed, before any train could run on to Horburg; but the Alberta Central didn't wait to build a bridge just then. They sent gangs across and built a couple more barricades across the river at right angles to the C. N. R. right-of-way.

This didn't stop the C. N. R. boys. They jumped the river, too, and both outfits began playing leap-frog with stretches of track clear on to Holburg.

The Alberta Central, however, was first to attempt bridging the river. This was an expensive undertaking since their

own rails did not yet run to Rocky Mountain House. They'd been too busy check-mating the C. N. R. So the citizens of Rocky saw their pastures turn even greener! Cement must be hauled from Red Deer, Lacombe, Innisfail and Bowden for the new bridge; and it must be hauled by teams, since nothing could be hauled on the C. N. R. rails.

The cement was hauled; but it was not easy. The roads were nothing but bogs. The mules died off under the strain. Oxen were the only animals which could stand up under the heavy loads of cement. As Mr. Hargraves says: "Skinners left the Calgary and Edmonton Railway with sacks of cement and a fresh shave, and arrived in Rocky with long beards!"

However they received \$1.25 per sack for hauling, and the job looked like a long one; for as soon as the Alberta Central bridge was completed, the C. N. R. would certainly begin their own bridge. However, this dream of fortune was not to come true. The Railway Commission decided in 1912 that only one bridge was needed across the Saskatchewan, and decided also that the Alberta Central (now taken over by the C. P. R.) would stop at Rocky Mountain House, while the C. N. R. would continue on to Horburg and Nordegg.

So if you are interested in knowing, should you ride from Red Deer to Nordegg on the C. N. R., why the train runs for three or four miles on C. P. R. track, and why it crosses the C. P. R. bridge, remember the "Battle of Horburg", possibly the longest battle in Canadian history, and maybe not yet entirely finished!

I think a great deal of the magic which I attach to Rocky Mountain House lies in its romantic name. It was explained to me that the name was given to the old Fort by John MacDonald of Garth when, in 1802, the Union Jack together with the flag of the North West Trading Company, was raised above the main building. He named the place "Rocky" because of the rocky formation of the river bed; "Mountain", for the beautiful view of the Rocky Mountains from the point; "House", of course, was the usual designation of a fur-trading post. "Rocky Mountain House" . . . a lengthy name, but a good one. A name that one remembers. A much, much better name than the one the railroad wanted to change it to . . . but I shall tell more about that presently.

Only the old chimneys of the old Fort are standing now, and these are partial restorations made a few years ago by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board.

Romance hangs heavy over the spot, however, and it is not hard to recall that the first white man to reach the site was Peter Pangman, one of Alexander Mackenzie's partners . . . and that Pangman inscribed his name on a great pine tree near the river endge which for years was known as "Pangman's Pine". Nor is it hard to recall that David Thompson wintered at the Fort before his trip to the Pacific.

his trip to the Pacific.

Stan Hooker, manager of the bank at Rocky, who drove me out to the "Chimneys" told me that often a square nail or other relic of the past is picked up on the spot, and that a few years ago, Mr. E. C. Brierly who now owns the land on which the old Fort was situated, was digging a well and that down about four feet they came onto a two-foot thick layer of ashes . . . which seems to imply that the ground level was once much lower.

Later, the same day I visited the "Chimneys", Mrs. Grace Schierholtz, Rocky Mountain House correspondent for a number of western newspapers, gave me other interesting side-lights on the old Fort. I had heard that a treasure of some sort had once been buried near the Fort. I asked Mrs. Schierholtz to tell me about the treasure.

"Oh," replied Mrs. Schierholtz, "that's a long story. Well, you asked for it, so here it is. You see, the country around here was known for years as Blackfoot country. The Blackfoot didn't seem to get along with the other tribes or with the white men. In the winter of 1819, the Indians decided they had some kind of grievance against the traders. They held a council of war, and made plans to sneak over to the Fort in the night, burn it down and scalp the whites.

"Most fortunately for the traders, there was an Indian, half Cree and half Blackfoot, who had been doctored by the Factor,

and chose this time to display the gratitude that is sometimes lacking in both white men and red. He had been one of the party at the Fort with furs the year before, and after the dipper had been passed a few times, this young brave became so jovial that he danced too close to the steep river bank and tumbled over. The bank goes almost straight down for over a hundred feet, and the fall might easily have killed the foolish young Indian.

"He got off with a broken leg, and the Factor and his men, perhaps feeling a trifle guilty when they remembered the whiskey barrel and the dipper, took the victim and set his leg. They cared for him until he was able to rejoin his tribe.

"When this young brave heard the murderous plans of his chief, he slipped away unnoticed and warned the Factor. There had been peace for a number of years, and the white men had begun to think their troubles with the Indians were over.

"The Fort was under-staffed, without enough guns, and almost no ammunition. The only thing to do was to flee. But before going, the traders buried as much of the supplies and furnishings as they could, including three cannon and a keg of rum.

"The Hudson's Bay Company had a map that shows the location of the three buried cannon, and a few years ago they sent a man out here to locate them. He hired a crew and they worked here for weeks but they didn't find a trace. The Company reluctantly

decided that the measurements shown on the map must be inaccurate."

"What did the Rocky Mountain House people think about this digging?" I asked.

"Oh," said Mrs. Schierholtz, "they watched with great interest. But perhaps they were really more concerned about the keg of rum supposed to be buried near the Fort. Rum aged for one hundred years! And would you believe it? The location of the rum is not shown on the map!"

"After the trading post closed in 1875," continued Mrs. Schierholtz, "there were very few white men in the district until 1904, when the homesteaders began to trek in. Red Deer was well started by then. There were rumors that the railway was going west, and the pioneers were in a hurry to get in on the ground floor. By 1907 there was a fair-sized settlement of Ontario and Old Country homesteaders.

"These pioneers were over sixty miles from the railroad until the 'Battle of Horburg' which brought the railroad scurrying through to Nordegg, sixty miles west, to tap the rich Brazeau coal fields.

"Some years ago one of the railroads decided that the name 'Rocky Mountain House' was far too cumbersome a name to print in timetables or on tickets, so they quietly undertook to change it to 'Lochearn'.

"The howl that went up must have been heard as far as Ottawa, for every old-timer was justly indignant. 'Rocky Mountain House' meant something, and what is there to an insipid name like 'Lochearn'? They admitted that the three words make considerable writing, but they like them. The name links the modern town with the days of the fur-traders and explorers. It makes readers remember that this place, though it looks like a new town, is really over two hundred years old!

"One of the few residents in favor of the change pointed out that the name is odd, to put it mildly. He cited an instance. His brother in New York City went down one day to send him a telegram, and when the girl in the office read the address, she flatly refused to believe there was such a place. The customer insisted in vain that he had a brother living there, and that he had many letters marked 'Rocky Mountain House'.

"The clerk repeated that there simply couldn't be a town with a name like that, and she stuck to her guns. The man had to call an official before he could have the wire dispatched.

"Our citizens retorted that they didn't care whether New Yorkers believed there could be such a place or not! They insisted in keeping their name that had a history. They protested so loud, and so long that the railway company finally pretended that it was all good, clean fun, and that they had never intended to make such a drastic change. But for some years, the place was listed as 'Lochearn' in the timetables

. . . until that issue was out of print!"

Lumbering is Rocky's leading industry. At one time the place was one of the leading lumber centers on the continent. Lumber from the mountain slopes built homes and schools and churches the whole length and breadth of western Canada. Lumber went from Rocky as far as New York, Detroit and Chicago. Rocky shipped out ties to build the railroads; corral posts for the ranches, pit-props for the coal mines; telephone poles to string across the endless prairie. That was in the boom days. Today, Rocky has settled down to steadier times, shipping out millions of feet every year . . . going farther and farther back into the woods to get it.

Some of the camps are far out. Nobody calls in, and lumber-jacks are inclined to lose track of time. According to one story a traveller showed up at one of the camps the middle of January. The camp cook greeted him with great joy and asked him to stay for dinner. The traveller replied that he was sorry, but he couldn't stay. "Please Stay!" urged the cook. "It's mighty cheerful to have a visitor for Christmas dinner!"

Every Wednesday at Rocky is "pig day". Pig raising is one of the thriving businesses of the region. Pigs have always done well there.

On Wednesday long lines of pigs converge on the town. Some come

by truck and wagon; but many are simply driven. It is a common sight to see a pig-drive down Main Street, with the animals behaving just as "contrary" in town as they do on the farm.

One old farmer came to town one day and brought a few pigs to sell. He sold his pigs, bought half-a-dozen others and started driving them right up Main Street to where he had his wagon. It was a boiling hot day in mid-summer and he was dressed in just a shirt and bib overalls. He used nails, like all bachelors, in place of buttons, and this day, because of his strenuous exercise, the nails worked a little loose. He was racing down the middle of Main, after his pigs when a couple of the essential nails gave way. He lost his overalls. Nobody knows where they went. One thing is certain, though, their owner didn't show up in Rocky again for a long, long time!

Travellers leaving Rocky do not care to go on the train that leaves on Wednesday morning. All the trains are "mixed" but the pig-train on Wednesday is more mixed than usual. The odors are not entirely pleasant, and the train stops at every siding to pick up pigs, and more pigs!

Furs are still shipped from Rocky, too. Not so many, of course, as in the old days, but this year, at least, the trappers are doing well. When I was there, I was told about two trappers who had come in a day or so before, with over three thousand dollars worth of fur. This was only half through the fur

season, at that.

There is coal, natural gas and oil in the country around Rocky; and wild berries come out of the region in crates and carloads. The Indians gather lots of "Seneca Root" which go, or did go, to China to be made into cough medicine. One Indian lady, so they say, brought in enough "Seneca Root" to get herself a permanent wave!

And there's gold, too. There has always been gold in the North Saskatchewan . . . not in large quantities, but an industrious man can still make four or five dollars a day panning, if he chooses. Stan Hooker drove me down to the river bank to look at a curious boat built by a man named Frank James, who had the idea that there must be lots of gold in the deep pot-holes of the river. He built the boat with a special pump to hoist out the deep river sand. His scheme has never been tried . . . the boat is standing idle on the river bank, but old-timers tell me that there might, there just might, mind you, be something in the James scheme.

You will find a variety of types of people at Rocky, and among them all the spirit of independence is strong. Some of the settlers have done well, and anyone can do well just now if he chooses . . . there's such a shortage of help. Nature is kind to Rocky folk, and provides meat and fruit, plenty of wood for building, and fuel . . . one doesn't actually need much cash.

I am told that many a family around Rocky seldom sees more than fifty dollars in cash the year round. I was told the story of one settler who came to his municipal council for aid. He wanted enough road-work to do him till spring. "How much money will you need?" asked the council. "It's three months till Spring, how much money will you need each month?"

"Well," replied the settler, "I could get along fine on a dollar and a half!"

They tell me of one woman who worked at one time in one of Europe's royal households. She came out with her husband, farmed with oxen, cleared brush, pumped water by hand for eighty-five head of cattle. She's now one of the district's honored pioneers.

I heard also of a former officer of the Russian Imperial Army who fled his country at the time of the Revolution. When he came to Rocky he didn't have a nickle in the world. Today he and his wife own a one-hundred and sixty acre farm, and are doing well.

One man came to Rocky only a few years ago with nothing except two dollars worth of groceries. He made a deal to cut cord-wood that first winter in return for a team, some traps and a gun. He got that equipment, but when spring came he needed a dollar's worth of garden seed. So he walked twelve miles into Rocky and persuaded the Chinese laundryman to give him a dollar's worth of work. For a year or two he went on like that.

Now he makes a fair living, and has relied only on himself.

The Indians at Rocky also maintain their independent spirit. One of the very few remaining bands of non-treaty Indians lives about thirty miles from Rocky Mountain House. Last summer the Government tried once more to persuade them to accept treaty, but this proposal was flatly turned down by a vote of one hundred seventy-seven to twenty-three. In refusing the offer the Indians argued that this was their country, and had been theirs long before the white man arrived. Since they had never taken treaty they had never given up their right to the land. They said that the white man was the intruder, and should leave them in peace on the land that had been theirs since the world began.

An interesting legend exists among the little band of non-treaty Chippewas. The legend concerns Chief Jim O'Chase, a famous Chippawa, who died in 1932. When Chief O'Chase was a lad of seven, his band was camped in the hills along the Red Deer River. A scout suddenly reported that a larger band of hostile Indians was spying on the camp. Under cover of darkness the Chippewas moved out to safety, and in the early morning hours resumed their journey. It was not until the forenoon that the lad, Jim O'Chase was discovered to be missing.

The boy had become separated from the band in the darkness, and later remembered, that when waking up under a clump of bushes he was being nosed about by a big bull buffalo. This was in early spring, and the boy followed the buffalo herd about all

summer, snuggling up to their shaggy bodies for warmth during the night and eating, nobody knows what.

Late the next fall, his uncle, still searching for some trace of the missing lad, heard him whimpering in a dense, scrubby coulee, and there found the lad alive and well. The boys said that his buffalo friends had deserted him that morning -- when human help was within reach.

Asked what he had lived on, he replied that his God had fed him.

Most of the people at Rocky are convinced that their region is the best in the world, and wouldn't want to live anywhere else. They hope that sometime a road will be put through from Nordegg, sixty miles west, to connect with the Banff-Jasper highway. They believe this will make Rocky one of the important tourist centers of western Canada.

Two or three years ago some of the enterprising citizens of Rocky decided that they would take a car from Rocky to the Banff-Jasper road, just to show doubters that the idea was practical. They chopped down trees, forded rivers, and succeeded! A remarkable feat when one remembers that they went right through the mountains!

The foresters at Rocky told me that this road would almost certainly be put through, and when it is, I hope that Rocky has the boom the citizens anticipate, for I have a real fondness

for this place of so much good-humor and so much that is laugh-
ably mysterious. I like Rocky just as I like High River.
High River is the capital of the ranching tradition . . . the
heart of the romance of the ranch country. Rocky Mountain
House is a capital, too . . . of courage, good humor and inde-
pendence. Long may they both live!